

Coffee Conversation Summary

What Security in the Black Sea Region?

A first glimpse into the main actors, events and challenges

On 13 May, PfEU held its first Coffee Conversation of the month. The discussion focused on the Security in the Black Sea region, which is gaining importance in the international and European security agenda. A number of key issues such as increased militarisation, the continuing importance of the region's vast natural resources, the changing nature of security threats such as mis/disinformation campaigns and the ongoing frozen conflicts of the region have raised important questions about the region's current and future security situation. Our speakers were Freddie Whitlow and Letitia Roman, both permanent authors at A Path for Europe (PfEU). Freddie focuses on trans Atlanticism, European defence integration, security policy in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space, and the West's relations with the broader Kurdish region. Letitia's areas of interest include security, Conflict Management, and International Affairs, with a focus on Eastern Europe and neighbouring countries, and in this discussion, she has explored the geopolitics of gas in the Black Sea region. Our host/chairman was Polen Türkmen, research associate at A Path for Europe (PfEU).

With its mosaic of problems, and their potential consequences, the wider Black Sea region is one of the more important challenges that the enlarged European Union will face. So far, the EU and the Black Sea region are linked together by two member states (Romania and Bulgaria) and a strong EU partner (Turkey), as well as special relations with Ukraine and Russia. The EU directly borders the Black Sea region through Bulgaria and Romania, accounting for half of its coastline. Threats to regional security are diverse, including ongoing and potential military conflicts between states, frozen conflicts, displaced populations and terrorism. Strong disinformation campaigns are also deployed in the region, as a form of geopolitical mechanism aiming to control, subdue or even destabilise the region. Military expenditures are rising, and issues of energy dependency and supply diversity are vital. The lack of cooperation has created a "security vacuum" exacerbating global and regional rivalries. Despite EU and US promotion of democracy and the rule of law, authoritarian governing styles are common across the region.

Criticism has arisen on the EU's lack of position and stance towards the security region. The EU was created as an economic power, not a military power and only after Romania and Bulgaria became member states did the EU's presence increase in the region, either through becoming an active trade vector, or through proximity. But does the EU have security and diplomatic power? Because there is a lack of a defined strategic policy, it might not be able to keep up with multiple crisis in the region. Whether it will be shaken by crisis or it will be able to prevent crisis is yet to be seen. While the EU is not yet a security power, the EU is indeed an economic power and at times it can be a deterrent for Russia to act, through sanctions and conditionality. In other forms, the Commission has tried to get more involved in the region by deploying the Southern Gas Corridor, to reduce Europe's dependency on Russia gas and diverse sources of energy supply. Despite the existence of many initiatives, which are designed to increase the presence of the EU in the region, the international community (and this includes Russia) has tended to treat the EU as an actor with no more than a limited ability to reach collective decisions and with a limited impact on the region's security structure.

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Key Takeaways

- A number of issues in the Black Sea Region persist, such as increased militarisation, continued exploitation of the region's natural resources, changing nature of security threats such as misinformation campaigns.
- EU policy can and should be strengthened in relation and role in the Black Sea Region, especially as some EU countries border with it.
 - There is a need for policies that can prevent tensions in the region from turning into armed conflicts. For this purpose, there needs to be a military armament map of all the states in the region.
 - An attempt should be made to introduce certain political and military restrictions in order to sustain a regional balance. International security structures could be especially useful when it comes to developing preventive mechanisms.
 - It might be useful to establish proactive and effective international monitoring mechanisms in areas which can easily turn into hot conflict zones. In case this mechanism fails, there should also be another international mechanism which will enable other actors to become involved in the conflict as quickly as possible and to arrange a ceasefire between the belligerents.
 - EU cooperation programmes should stop stratifying or excluding certain actors in the region. They should be redesigned as inclusive programmes that depend on the participation of all the regional actors. In this framework regional structures such as the BSEC should assume a leadership role.

